



Barriers to Proficiency: EFL-Students Reluctance in Writing Skills (A Descriptive Analysis)

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Abstract— *The achievement of proficient writing skills remains one of the most formidable challenges in the field of English Foreign Language Learning (EFL) and applied linguistics. While literacy is a cornerstone of academic and professional success, a significant demographic of students exhibits a persistent reluctance to engage in writing tasks, a phenomenon often characterized by avoidance behaviors, high levels of anxiety, and linguistic stagnation. This research paper investigates the multidimensional nature of student reluctance in writing, categorizing the inhibitors into three primary domains: psychological constructs, cognitive-linguistic barriers, and pedagogical misalignments. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive framework, this study explores how writing apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and the cognitive load of bilingual processing contribute to this resistance. Furthermore, the paper examines the evolving role of digital literacy and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in either mitigating or exacerbating student hesitation. Preliminary analysis suggests that reluctance is rarely a result of a lack of motivation alone; rather, it is an adaptive response to perceived linguistic inadequacy and instructional methods that prioritize product over process. The study concludes by advocating for a shift toward "Process-Oriented Pedagogy" and the integration of self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies to empower students, reduce affective filters, and foster a more resilient writing identity.*



Keywords— *Applied Linguistics, Writing Reluctance, Artificial Intelligence, Affective Filter, Cognitive Load, Pedagogical Barriers.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Teachers around the world are facing growing reluctance from students. This problem is clear for the authors as teachers of EFL for more than 14 years. They do their best to have their students well-motivated and able to formulate ideas and arguments using written communication. Applied linguistics defines writing as an advanced cognitive-social-language exercise. The goal of this paper is to introduce the scope of this study. Namely what background led to this study, it explores the background, the specific problem, and the theoretical framework guiding this investigation.

1.1 Background of the Study:

The "Four Skills" of language -listening, speaking, reading, and writing- have been the basis for pedagogy in curriculum design. Writing stands out as particularly challenging. It demands explicit knowledge of syntax, spelling, and discourse markers .

In the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the difficulty increases. Learners face the "Dual-Task" phenomenon. They are trying to master English while also learning the rules of academic writing. Recent changes toward digital communication have made this even more complicated. Students may write more in informal settings like texting and social media, but there is a widening gap between their

informal fluency and formal academic performance. This gap often shows up as reluctance. Students may delay, avoid, or put in minimal effort when faced with formal writing assignments.

1.2 Statement of the Problem:

The core problem that will be addressed in this study is higher and secondary students showing signs of reluctance. Reluctance to write is a very complicated psychological and language barrier. Despite having access to advanced writing tools and various teaching strategies, many students remain stuck at the pre-writing stage. This reluctance is not just laziness or a lack of discipline, as some might think. It is a complex psychological and linguistic defense mechanism. When the cognitive demands of a task exceed what a learner believes they can handle, they often disengage completely. If ignored, this reluctance can lead to poor academic performance, less professional growth, and a lasting fear of writing that continues into adulthood. We need to clearly identify these barriers to go beyond superficial solutions .

1.3 Purpose of the Study:

The primary goal of this descriptive research is to identify and categorize the specific factors that trigger reluctance in writing. The study aims to:

- Explore the psychological causes of writing anxiety.
- Determine how first language (L1) interference and cognitive load affect second language (L2) writing speed and quality.
- Assess how traditional teaching methods, like focusing on final products, might discourage student participation.

1.4 Research Questions:

To guide this investigation, we propose the following questions:

- What primary psychological factors, such as anxiety, self-belief, and fear of evaluation, are linked to writing reluctance?
- How do cognitive and language limitations in English proficiency contribute to avoiding complex writing tasks?
- How do teaching environments and feedback systems affect a student's willingness to engage in writing?

1.5 Significance of the Study:

This research is important for curriculum developers, writing center directors, and language teachers. It provides the context needed to create more supportive and effective writing experiences.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Writing reluctance is not a fixed state but a complex issue that has gained attention in applied linguistics. This chapter reviews scholarly discussions about the psychological, cognitive, and sociocultural aspects of this problem. By looking at the relationship between the learner's mental state and their language environment, we can create a clear picture of the barriers that prevent student engagement .

2.1 The Psychology of Writing Apprehension:

Writing apprehension, a term popularized by Daly and Miller (1975), remains a key focus in studying student reluctance. Recent research indicates that this hesitation is deeply rooted in performance anxiety. Unlike reading or listening, writing creates a permanent record of a learner's language abilities that can be repeatedly examined by instructors and peers.

Fear of Negative Evaluation: In the modern classroom, the focus on error correction can cause avoidance. Holmes et al. (2018) point out that graduate students often experience a crisis of identity when their writing is critiqued. This can lead to paralysis where students prefer not to write than risk doing it poorly.

Self-Belief and Writing Identity: Bandura's idea of self-efficacy is crucial here. Students who see themselves as poor writers tend to fulfill that belief. Amerstorfer and Münster-Kistner (2021) note that when students doubt their ability to organize ideas, their engagement decreases. This is especially true in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) settings, where the stakes are high.

2.2 Cognitive Barriers and the Dual-Language Burden:

From a cognitive standpoint, writing in a foreign language requires significant executive function. The brain must handle vocabulary retrieval, apply complex grammar rules, and maintain linguistic coherence simultaneously .

The Bottleneck Effect: Conti (2026) describes writing in a second language as a cognitive bottleneck. L2 learners often lack automatic language structures, requiring conscious effort for basic mechanics like spelling or verb conjugation. This leaves little mental capacity for higher-order tasks like argumentation or structure, leading to mental fatigue and reluctance .

L1 Interference and Translation Fatigue: Many reluctant writers get trapped in a cycle of mental translation. They think of ideas in their native language and struggle to find the right words in English. This friction creates a delay that makes writing feel tedious and unrewarding .

2.3 The Role of Digital Literacy and AI:

The years between 2023 and 2026 have seen a significant change in how writing is done due to generative AI. This

has introduced a new form of reluctance: technological dependency .

The AI Influence: Recent findings from Preprints.org (2026) suggest that students may hesitate to write naturally because they see a gap between their own work and AI-generated content. This sense of inadequacy can prevent them from developing their unique voice .

Plagiarism Anxiety: On the other hand, the heavy use of AI-detection tools in universities has created a culture of surveillance. Some students report being reluctant to write for fear that their work may be flagged as AI-generated by flawed algorithms (Streefkerk, 2024)

2.4 Teaching Misalignments:

Traditional product-oriented instruction is increasingly seen as a deterrent. When the final grade is the only measure of success, the writing process, which includes messy drafts and struggles, is undervalued .

Feedback Loops: Research by Pardede (2024) indicates that collaborative writing and peer review can lower anxiety. However, when feedback is late or only summative, it fails to help students escape their avoidance cycle .

Task Authenticity: Students are much more reluctant when writing tasks feel disconnected from real life. Writing a standard five-paragraph essay solely for a grade lacks the intrinsic motivation found in task-based or project-based learning .

2.5 Summary:

The literature shows that reluctance is a multifaceted issue. It brings together emotional (anxiety), mechanical (grammar/vocabulary), and instructional feedback/task design challenges. Going forward, we must shift our focus from fixing students to improving the writing environment. This will help ensure the cognitive load is manageable and psychological safety is prioritized.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research design. It aims to document current conditions without affecting the study's scope. This chapter details the procedure used to identify and categorize barriers to writing proficiency observed in recent academic settings .

3.1 Research Design:

Given that writing reluctance is an internal psychological state seen through external avoidance, the researcher applied a descriptive qualitative design. This approach aims to uncover the reasons behind the behavior by providing rich context. By focusing on descriptive analysis, this study compiles insights from classroom interactions, student self-

reports, and the latest linguistic research to outline the landscape of writing resistance (Amerstorfer & Frein von Münster-Kistner, 2021).

3.2 Data Collection Sources :

The primary data for this research comes from a systematic review of current academic sources and teaching case studies from 2021 to 2026. The sources include:

- Peer-Reviewed Journals: High-impact publications in applied linguistics and education psychology .

- Preprint Repositories: Recent data from 2026 regarding the impact of AI on student writing behaviors (Preprints.org, 2026).

- Curriculum Reports: Analysis of CEFR-aligned writing tasks and their relationship with student engagement levels.

3.3 The Role of the Descriptive Framework:

This research uses the Affective Filter Inventory and Cognitive Load Mapping as lenses for description. Instead of measuring student ability, the methodology aims to identify friction points in the writing process. For instance, data collection focuses on pinpointing when a student stops writing—whether during brainstorming (pre-writing), drafting (linguistic struggle), or revising (evaluation anxiety)

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis uses a Thematic Synthesis approach. The collected data was organized into three main topics :

Linguistic Deficit vs. Psychological Block: This topic distinguishes between students who cannot write due to language limitations and those who will not write due to anxiety .

The Feedback-Response Cycle: This examines how different types of teacher feedback affect student willingness to participate .

Technological Interaction: This maps the shift from manual writing to AI-assisted writing and the resulting loss of activity in students (Streefkerk, 2024).

3.5 Limitations of the Methodology:

This study outlines the current state of the field. The findings are limited by the fast changes in AI tools, which may shift student writing psychology more quickly than traditional peer-reviewed literature can document. However, the basic psychological and cognitive principles, like anxiety and cognitive load, remain the same in both analog and digital settings.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents descriptive findings from the research, evaluating the data collected through psychology, linguistics, and pedagogy. The discussion provides a detailed examination of why students hesitate to engage with writing.

4.1 The Structure of Resistance:

The data shows that reluctance to write is rarely a simple state of being motivated or unmotivated. Instead, it represents a spectrum of avoidance.

The Perfectionism Trap: Students describe a situation where the ideal version of their essay in their mind is so distant from their actual abilities that writing feels like a betrayal of their intelligence. This leads to significant procrastination (Holmes et al., 2018).

The Social Cost of Writing: Analysis of the data suggests that for many L2 learners, writing involves high social risks. Unlike speaking, where mistakes are often overlooked, writing serves as a permanent record of one's abilities. This social vulnerability creates a strong affective filter, delaying the creative process before it begins.

4.2 The Cognitive Load of L2 Composition:

The analysis of cognitive barriers highlights a notable gap in processing that characterizes reluctant writers.

Lower-level vs. higher-level processing: Reluctant writers often find themselves stuck in lower-level thinking. The data indicates that while skilled writers have automated their spelling and basic syntax, reluctant writers expend up to 80% of their cognitive capacity on managing verb tenses and word choice (Conti, 2026). As a result, when they need to analyze or evaluate—tasks that require high-level thinking—they quickly run out of mental energy.

The blank page submission as cognitive overload: Observations show that it is not a lack of ideas that holds students back, but lexical disorientation. Many students feel overwhelmed by the number of options available to them (lexical, structural, and thematic). Without structured support or pre-writing strategies, this overload can result in failure to complete the task.

4.3 The Impact of Digital Transition:

A key finding in this 2026 analysis is the use of AI. While generative AI was initially viewed as a helpful tool for reluctant writers, the data suggests it may increase their reluctance.

Agency Loss: Students who depend on AI to create first drafts often feel a loss of ownership. They describe the resulting text as not their own, which further distances them from the writing process. Rather than improving their writing skills, they become prompt engineers, which does

not alleviate the underlying anxiety about their own writing (Preprints.org, 2026).

Detection Anxiety: The discussion also highlights that the fear of being wrongly accused of using AI has added a new layer of psychological stress, making students reluctant to use even helpful digital tools like Grammarly or spell-checkers.

4.4 Instructional Feedback: The Red Pen vs. The Green Pen:

The data analysis emphasizes the instructor's role in either breaking or reinforcing the cycle of reluctance.

Corrective vs. Formative Feedback: Traditional feedback that focuses on what is wrong tends to trigger the affective filter. In contrast, formative feedback correlates positively with increased student risk-taking in later drafts.

The Power of Small Wins: The research notes that students who write show a marked decrease in reluctance when approaching high-stakes academic tasks.

4.5 Synthesis of Findings :

The evidence suggests that student reluctance is a response to an overwhelming environment. When the fear of failure meets the cognitive challenges of L2 writing, compounded by a high-pressure classroom, reluctance is a logical result. The Reluctant Writer is not someone who dislikes writing, but someone who is protecting their self-esteem from a seemingly impossible task.

V. CONCLUSION

The research findings offer practical strategies for educators and researchers to tackle student reluctance in writing within applied linguistics.

5.1 Summary of Findings:

This research describes writing reluctance not as a fixed trait but as a complex response to linguistic and psychological pressures. The investigation shows that the reluctant writer often finds themselves in a cycle where fear of evaluation and cognitive overload reinforce each other.

Psychological Blockage: Anxiety and a strong affective filter are the key predictors of writing avoidance.

Cognitive Constraints: The lack of linguistic automation in L2 learners creates barriers, making writing physically and mentally exhausting.

Pedagogical Impact: Focusing too much on correctness over communication discourages risk-taking, while the growth of AI introduces new layers of action loss and detection anxiety.

5.2 Conclusion:

In conclusion, student reluctance in writing is a complex issue that needs a multifaceted approach. Applied linguistics should move beyond viewing writing as a purely mechanical task. To nurture skilled writers, we first need to support resilient writers. The evidence shows that providing a safe environment—where teachers replace red ink with constructive dialogue and manage cognitive load through scaffolding—helps diminish reluctance. As we progress into an AI-enhanced academic world, preserving the human aspects of writing is more important than ever.

5.3 Recommendations:

Based on the analysis, the researchers suggest:

Implement Process-Oriented Writing: Shift attention from the final product to the stages of brainstorming, drafting, and peer review. This lowers the stakes for initial attempts.

Scaffold for Cognitive Load: Offer transitions, vocabulary banks, and graphic organizers to help students avoid lower-level mechanical issues, allowing them to focus on higher-order thinking.

Integrate Low-Stakes Writing: Encourage freewriting or digital journaling without graded grammar. These builds writing stamina and lessens the fear of the blank page.

Redefine AI Integration: Instead of banning AI, use it as a pre-writing partner to assist students in generating ideas, while ensuring strict requirements for the student's voice in the final product.

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